The Bill Piercy Dairy

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The U.S. government rationed gasoline and tires during World War II to support the war effort. In 1942, Sam Meyer's Meyer Dairy and M. D. Fugate's Oakwood Dairy ran an ad in the Blade newspaper. They announced that because of rationing, they would no longer deliver milk to the homes in Fairbury. To buy milk, Fairbury citizens had to go to one of the nine grocery stores in Fairbury at that time. This 1942 Blade ad documents the existence of two dairies and nine grocery stores in Fairbury at that time.

In 1950, a new dairy business called Bill's Dairy was started in Fairbury. The story of Bill's Dairy began with the birth of James Howard Piercy in Barren County, Kentucky, in 1886. Barren County is in south-central Kentucky.

James H. Piercy (1886-1959) married Minnie Claudia Davis (1890-1930), also from Barren County, Kentucky. One of the children of James and Minnie Piercy was William Childress "Bill" Piercy. He was born in Barren County in 1914.

Minnie Davis had a brother named Charles L. Davis (1888-1940). He married Beulah J. Harris (1895-1966). One of their children was Howard Marvin Davis, born in 1923. Howard Davis was Bill Piercy's first cousin. Howard was about nine years younger than Bill Piercy.

In the 1920 Census, Bill Piercy was five years old and lived with his parents in Temple Hill in Barren County, Kentucky. His father, James Piercy, was 33, and his mother, Minnie Piercy, was 29. Bill's sister, Annie J. Piercy, who was less than one year old, also lived in the household.

Unfortunately, Minnie Piercy, age 40, died of tuberculosis in her lungs on January 17, 1930, in Barren County, Kentucky. When she died, son Bill Piercy was 15, daughter Annie Piercy was 10, and son Charlie Piercy was age five. When the 1930 Census was taken a few months later, the family lived in Barren County.

In 1940, Bill Piercy married Marcella Lurana Gilbert. She was born in 1921 in Marengo, Iowa. Her parents were Clarence E. Gilbert (1881-1942) and May Belle Taylor (1889-1973). Bill was 25, and May was 18 when they married. They had four children. Their children included Norman, Sharon, Brian, and Phyllis.

Bill and Marcella Gilbert moved to Wisconsin, where Bill worked on several dairy farms. In 1946, the Bill Piercy family moved from Wisconsin to Illinois so Bill could work on an Illinois dairy farm.

The Roszell family operated a huge dairy named Roszell's Dairy in Peoria, and they built a huge building for their milk and ice cream factory. In 1935, the National Products Corporation, which later became Kraft Foods, created the Sealtest brand. Sealtest purchased the Roszell ice cream factory building, which is now known as the Sealtest building and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1947, the J. D. Roszell company was an affiliate of Sealtest. They were looking for a milk and ice cream distributor for the Fairbury area. Bill Piercy accepted this position and moved his family to Fairbury. They eventually lived in a house at the east end of Locust Street.

Bill walked the streets of Fairbury and started signing up citizens for home milk delivery. All Roszell distributors operated ice cream dairy stores along with milk delivery routes. Bill managed to get a room in an old building on Second Street by the railroad tracks for his store. He opened his store in July 1947. Bill sold up to six hundred gallons of ice cream per month in the summer; all hand-dipped into pints and quarts.

Bill and Marcella Piercy's son Brian was born at the Fairbury Hospital in 1948. At that time, Frank Cox was the hospital manager. Mr. Cox gave the contract for supplying milk to the hospital to the Piercy dairy.

Also in 1948, Bill's first cousin, Howard Davis (1923-1975), became a partner in the dairy business. Howard and his wife, Zelma Davis, moved to Fairbury. The dairy bought a second truck and began moving into neighboring towns, including Chenoa, Strawn, Lexington, Towanda, Chatsworth, Forrest, and Pontiac. Eventually, they operated three trucks.

Bill Piercy's dairy business got its most significant break in 1950 when Dave Steffen and his wife came to Fairbury and opened their grocery store. Piercy Dairy got the contract to provide milk and ice cream to Dave's Supermarket. Because the ice cream was now available at Dave's Supermarket, Mr. Piercy closed his retail store on Second Street. He moved the milk cooler onto a concrete slab in the back of his house on East Locust Street.

By 1959, Dave's Supermarket purchased $800 a week from the Piercy Dairy. That sales amount would be equivalent to $8,763 in today's dollars.

In 1959, a retailer's cooperative serving independent supermarkets in Illinois was known as Certified Grocers Midwest. This cooperative, founded in 1940, was a member of Retailer-Owned Food Distributors & Associates. It helped independent stores compete with larger chains by allowing them to pool resources for purchasing and advertising while still maintaining individual ownership. Dave's Supermarket was part of this cooperative group at that time.

Unfortunately for Piercy's Dairy, the Certified Grocers group developed its own brand of milk to be sold in all the stores that belonged to that group. Piercy Dairy lost the contract for Dave's Supermarket, and it lost half of its business within a month of the change. It

took two years to build its sales back up to the level when it still had the contract to supply milk to Dave's Supermarket.

Bill Piercy and Howard Davis operated their dairy business until 1974. Then, there was a gasoline shortage, and they decided to close the business. In 1974, Bill Piercy was 60, and Howard Davis was 50 when they closed the business.

Just one year later, Howard Davis died in 1975 at the age of 51. His wife, Zelma Davis, died in 2012 at the age of 82. Howard and Zelma Davis were buried in Fairbury's Graceland Cemetery.

Bill Piercy lived in Fairbury from 1947 to 2008. Marcella Piercy died in 2009 at the age of 88. Bill Piercy died in 2010 at the age of 96. They were both interred in Bloomington's East Lawn Memorial Gardens Cemetery and Mausoleum

Sometime before he died, Bill Piercy wrote a four-page letter describing all the phases of the Piercy Sealtest Dairy. A descendant recently donated a copy of this letter to the Fairbury Echoes Museum, which can be viewed on its website.

Bill Piercy and Howard Davis operated the Piercy Sealtest Dairy in Fairbury from 1947 until 1974. This business provided milk and ice cream to Fairbury residents for about 27 years.

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